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ABSTRACT

The authors review the relationship of technical assistance agencies with both the sponsor and clients, as well as the general reasons for technical assistance. Technical assistance efforts usually involve a three-party relationship--the funding agency, the client system, and technical assistance coordinator. Technical assistance systems in education are designed to foster growth and change in people--to help them acquire skills, knowledge, methods, or attitudes. Assumptions that should guide a technical assistance organization include that technical assistance is a process, not an event, and that technical assistance takes place within the context of a formal, ongoing relationship that is based on mutual trust and respect. There are 10 dimensions along which technical assistance models reflect varying positions such as comprehensive services/limited services, user-identified needs/system-identified needs, content orientation/process orientation, advocacy/neutrality, and flexible technical assistance plans/fixed technical assistance plans. Conflicts within the three party relationship may arise between funding agency and technical assistance coordinator, between funding agency and client system, and between the assistance agency and the client system. Three unsatisfactory ways to resolve conflicts are the tyranny of confidentiality (in which the technical assistance group attempts to separate itself from the monitoring function), tyranny of expertise (when the assistance agency staff members perceive themselves as the ultimate experts in the field), and imposition of the power hierarchy (in which the sponsoring agency resolves the problem by asserting its power). A more positive approach to resolving conflicts is through supportive collaboration which involves such characteristics as frequent communication and resource identification. (SW)

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THE MATURATION OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN THE 1980's

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This Occasional Paper (number 2) was prepared for our colleagues and others interested in the diverse ideas and practices of technical assistance. The material is an outgrowth of a TADS colloquium on technical assistance held in Chapel Hill during the fall of 1980.

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Ten years ago the term technical assistance was rarely, if ever, used in educational circles; today, the professional literature contains hundreds of entries on the topic. Similarly, a multitude of activities bear the name technical assistance today. Federal programs in dozens of areas include funding for technical assistance projects. State and local education agencies have designated specific functions "technical assistance." Definitions abound -- not because of an extreme diversity of opinion among those involved in technical assistance, but because of the different conditions and purposes technical assistance systems are designed to address. Indeed, from our vantage point in an organization that has been an active participant in the development of what is now being referred to as a field, certain fundamental assumptions regarding the design and operation of technical assistance systems in education seem to be accepted (Trohanis, 1980; Williams, 1979).

The newness of the term technical assistance might lead one to believe that the phenomenon it describes is recent. Its origins, however, lie deep in several older fields -- human services, clinical supervision, organizational development, continuing education, and educational change, to name a few. In fact, it is not wholly preposterous to make a connection between the self-help and capacity-building emphasis of today's technical assistance systems and the ancient Chinese social structures where a strong community code of conduct supported the individual's development; or to,

the numerous forms of voluntary associations of the late 1700s which provided a structured support system for members who could draw on assistance ranging from knowledge to physical strength.

The earliest forms of federally-sponsored assistance, the large scale work programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, parallel contemporary federal technical assistance programs. They were all organized to serve identifiable groups and to address both the goals of individuals in those groups (through financial support) and the goals of society. The late 1960s and early 70s, the halcyon period of federal support for education, saw a surge in the sponsorship of technical assistance systems funded to support dozens of federal program initiatives. These Great Society programs, however, were too heavily based on the assumption that if only we spend more money on society's human problems, things will get better. For a variety of reasons, that dream has been tarnished, and the 1980s have begun in a substantially different political climate.

Much of the literature on technical assistance agencies is concerned with how they should be organized and administered. In this article, we will review the relationship of these agencies with both sponsor and clients as well as the general reasons for technical assistance. Then we'll turn to a discussion of the assumptions we feel should guide a technical assistance agency, the ways the system may be designed, the conflicts that may arise with its sponsor and clients, and the ways they may be resolved.

A Three-Party Relationship

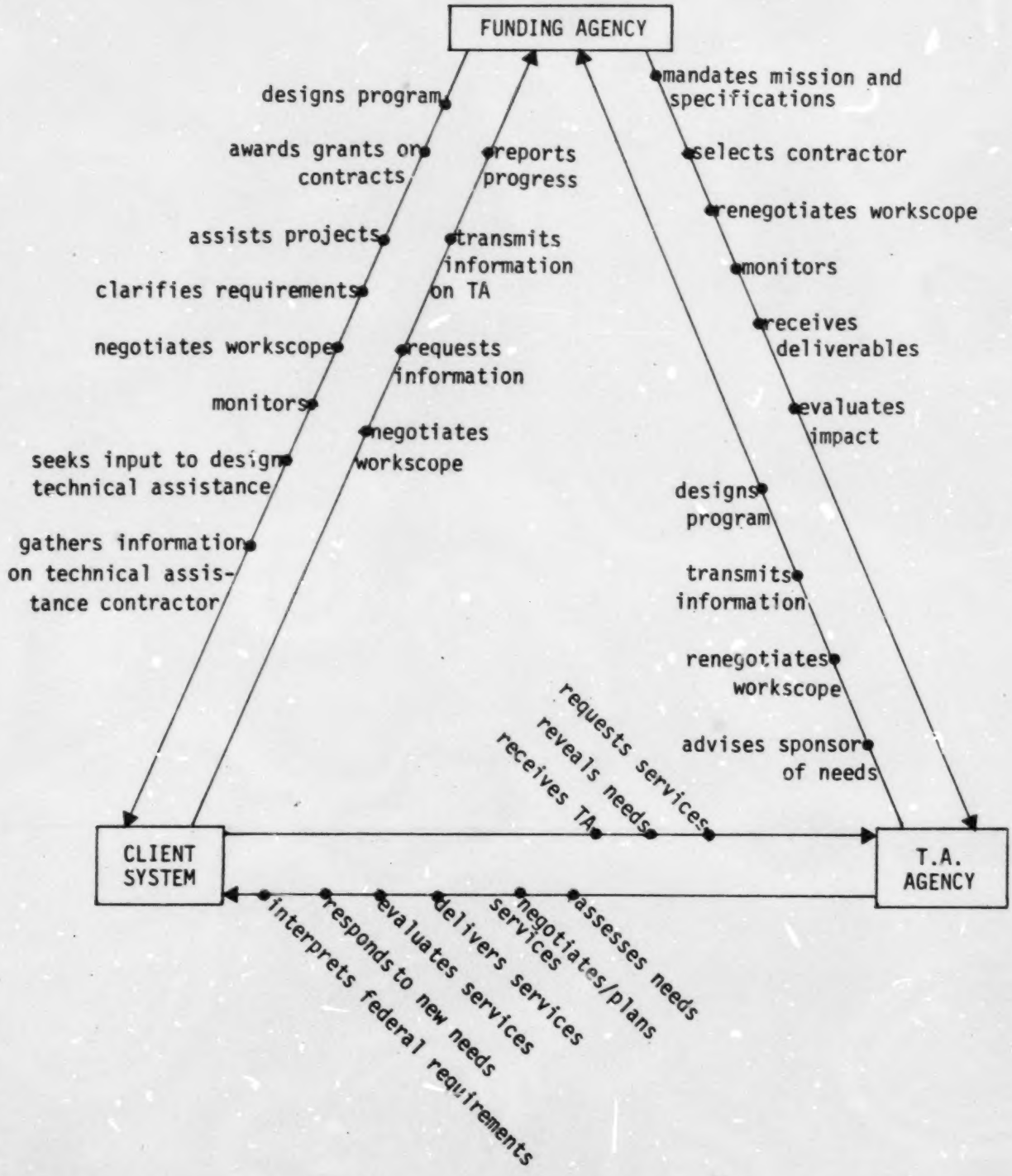
Presently, scores of technical assistance efforts are operating successfully and with some assurance of continuing support. They usually involve (particularly at the federal level) a three-party relationship: funding agency, client system, and technical assistance contractor. The funding

agency has objectives, usually based on law or regulations, that it hopes to achieve through the work of the client system and the technical assistance contractor. The client projects receive technical assistance to help them perform activities that address the objectives of the funding agency. In education, these activities typically involve development (of programs or staff to meet needs in specified areas); improvement (of programs or services, or of skills or methods); or dissemination (typically, of proven practices or programs to a nationwide audience). The funding agency retains responsibility for selecting and monitoring clients, but it contracts with an outside agency to provide them with services that help achieve the objectives. The technical assistance agency may be a private profit or nonprofit organization, a university, a state education agency, or a regional educational service unit. Within many state and local education agencies, a separate unit within the agency rather than an outside agency provides technical assistance services. When supported by a grant or contract, these units are temporary systems; when part of a public agency, they most often function as ongoing sub-systems of those agencies. Several functions that the three parties in the technical assistance relationship serve are shown in Figure 1 on page 6.

Defining technical assistance in this way may beg the questions: "Why have such relationships come to exist? Why are they perpetuated, particularly in light of present trends? Why should technical assistance be regarded as anything other than a 'frill'?" To answer these questions, a distinction must be made between support services delivered by technical assistance agencies and isolated support activities arranged for and delivered on an ad hoc rather than a planned basis. The differences -- and the raison d'etre for technical assistance -- are based on certain

FIGURE 1:

Functions of the Three Parties



assumptions about the purposes of technical assistance systems, the problems they are designed to solve, and the optimal means for achieving the purposes.

The Reason for Technical Assistance

Technical assistance systems in education are designed to foster growth and change in people -- to help them acquire new skills, knowledge, methods, or attitudes. The people typically served by technical assistance are engaged in new activities that go beyond their previous experience and for which they may lack certain skills and resources. They are often in new roles with new demands and priorities and intense time pressure. For example, a teacher who has developed a program in his or her classroom receives funds to run a model project. The teacher is suddenly project director and is responsible for developing, refining, validating, and disseminating the program within a three-year period. Or, the project director is an established expert in the content area of the project but is new to the management role. Or, the project was conceived and proposed by a grant specialist whose job was to help the agency compete for funding -- not to develop highly operable work plans. In all of these situations, the recipient of technical assistance is engaged in a demanding and complex set of tasks that will require a significant period of time to complete and certain kinds of specialized assistance.

To Provide Good Technical Assistance

Our experience in providing assistance to people in these and similar situations and our collaboration with other technical assistance professionals has led to the development of a set of assumptions that should guide a technical assistance organization:

Technical assistance, like change, is a process, not an event. Because

clients of our services are engaged in a long-term process of change, technical assistance support must continue over a period of time to support them as they pursue their objectives.

Good technical assistance is based on systematic procedures for determining needs and developing plans to meet them. Long-term improvement depends on needs assessment and planning. Both services help clients meet their objectives.

Technical assistance takes place within the context of a formal, ongoing relationship that is based on mutual trust and respect. Individuals who are attempting to change -- learn new skills, methods, and attitudes -- can benefit greatly from a relationship with an agency or individual that supports them in multiple ways over time.

Technical assistance services must include a broad range of resources and delivery modes. Comprehensive assistance must consider the content with which the client project is concerned, and the project's focus, needs, level of development, etc.

Technical assistance systems serving professionals are based on enrichment, not deficiency. Established principles of adult learning counsel that the experience and knowledge of the client be viewed as significant resources in focusing the assistance given and in building the client's capabilities.

System-Design Considerations

These assumptions, which form the basis of effective systems, must be united with effective design parameters for guiding the interaction between the client and the assistance agency. Each of the ten system-design

dimensions that follow represent a range of possible interactions. Technical assistance models in use reflect varying positions along each of these dimensions. The position chosen depends on factors such as the following: the mission of the sponsoring agency; the mandate to the technical assistance agency; the nature and quantity of resources available; the goals and characteristics of the client projects; and the milieu in which the client projects function.

Comprehensive Services/Limited Services. This dimension refers to the variety of resources and services available to meet client needs. A comprehensive system contains ways of meeting virtually any need of the client; a limited system restricts services either to areas of greatest priority or to areas for which resources (time, money, expertise) are available.

User-Identified Needs/System-Identified. In this dimension, the major consideration is the degree to which clients are able to assess their own needs accurately.

Proactive/Reactive. This dimension concerns the way the technical assistance agency decides upon services to deliver. Proactive agencies take the initiative in addressing needs even though clients may or may not perceive the needs. Reactive agencies respond to requests for help from clients.

Proximal/Distal. Do staff members from the technical assistance agency (proximal) or external consultants contracted by that group for specific assignments (distal) deliver services?

Content Orientation/Process Orientation. The orientation and training of the technical assistance staff or the mission of the technical assistance agency determines orientation. A process orientation is usually characterized by attention to the function, structure, and organization of the client project. Content-oriented agencies tend to focus on the content area addressed by the client organization. Process-oriented agencies offer assistance in the form of processes that lead the client to resources or solutions: e.g., the client is taken through a planning or problem-solving process to address a need. A content-oriented agency gives the client the solution to his need: e.g., money.

Advocacy/Neutrality. Early technical assistance agencies in special education are described by Deno (1974) as being staffed by "project advocates" who promoted the legitimate pursuits of the client group with the funding agency, host institutions, and related organizations. At the other extreme of this continuum are systems that remain neutral with regard to the political climate of the field and the relationship of the clients to the funding agency. A neutral technical assistance system does not advocate (or represent) a particular content orientation or methodology.

Individualized/Collectivized. Some technical assistance systems deliver services to one client at a time. Others group clients so services can be delivered to all or several simultaneously.

Capability Enhancement/Direct Aid. Some support systems try to increase the clients' capabilities as problem identifiers and solvers. Others do things for clients rather than teaching them how to do things

for themselves.

Flexible Technical Assistance Plans/Fixed Technical Assistance Plans. Designing assistance plans is a feature common to most agencies. Flexible plans may be updated or renewed periodically because needs and conditions change. Fixed plans are based on the assumption that the original plan will work without accommodating changes in conditions over time.

Personal/Impersonal. Technical assistance agencies vary in their attention to developing positive interpersonal relationships in the course of delivering services. In cases where trust and support are viewed as necessary concomitants to lasting change, a personalized approach would be featured.

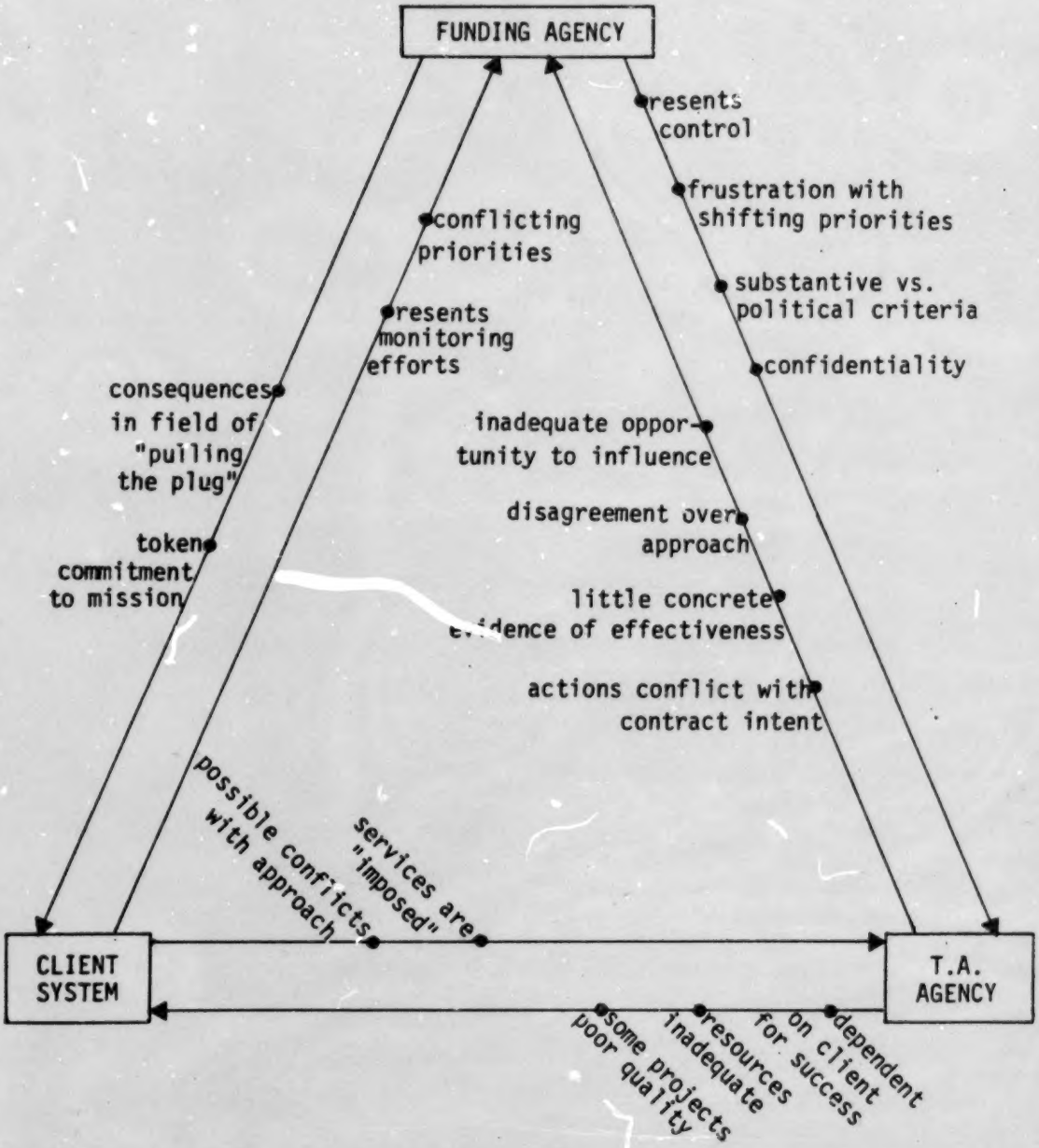
Conflicts

Within the three-party relationship depicted in Figure 1, potential conflicts may arise, and these may jeopardize the success of technical assistance efforts. Potential problems within each of the three-party relationships are illustrated in Figure 2 on page 12.

Conflicts between Funding Agency and Technical Assistance Contractor. The funding agency's program officer, anxious to assure the quality of the technical assistance program, may be frustrated by limited opportunities to influence the day-to-day, month-to-month operation of the contractor (e.g., newsletter content, workshop sessions, consultations, etc.). Also, serious disagreements over the approach to be taken by the technical assistance contractor with clients may arise, damaging the confidence each party has in the other. (All

FIGURE 2:

Potential Conflicts Among the Three Parties



aspects of the approach usually cannot be specified in the proposal or subsequent negotiations.) At times, the program officer may feel the assistance agency's actions conflict with the intent of the contract: e.g., services are allocated according to rules different from those agreed to or assumed.

The federal sponsor, under pressure from Congress and agency decision-makers to spend funds where they will most significantly improve educational services, must defend technical assistance programs with little concrete evidence of effectiveness to counter skepticism. To obtain that evidence, the sponsor may seek to control the technical assistance project tightly, prescribing its function and activities at a level that denies its staff's expertise and creativity. The technical assistance process can become overly mechanized and rigid. Filled with good intentions and a strong sense of integrity, the assistance agency may well resent the program officer's control. Ironically, the program officer's sense of ownership of the technical assistance effort may rival, unnecessarily, the ownership felt by the technical assistance agency -- thereby, leading to mutual resentment.

Conflicts Between Funding Agency and Client System. These problems are primarily over funding and monitoring decisions. The program officer may not be entirely supportive of the funded projects because the award decisions were not entirely his or her own. Field reviewers and review panels usually have significant influence in selecting those to be supported.

As part of their monitoring role, program officers are periodically confronted with decisions to terminate funding of particular projects: these decisions are especially difficult because of the consequences in the field of "pulling the plug" on a well-intentioned project. The program

officer also must deal with a number of projects that have only a token commitment to the mission of the agency; a fact that may well irritate.

The client project, on the other hand, has a job to do and may resent the monitoring by the federal agency. Quarterly reports, site visits, and even attendance at meetings conducted by the assistance agency may be seen as interfering with the "real work." Further, since many projects are initially motivated by local rather than national needs, spending decisions can highlight conflicting priorities over where resources should be used -- to serve more children or to replicate program activities in other areas.

Conflict Between Assistance Agency and Client System. When technical assistance services are "imposed" on clients -- i.e., clients did not initially ask for them or initiate contact with the assistance agency -- conflicts arise. The client must be aware of his or her need and commit energy and resources to address it. When services are "imposed," the assistance agency must carefully develop strategies and mechanisms to neutralize the negative aspects of such conflicts.

Client project staff members, many of whom are recognized leaders in their fields, may have their own views of how assistance systems should be designed and services delivered. This situation may lead to dissatisfaction with the approach taken by the technical assistance agency, especially for clients who feel the mission of the technical assistance agency is to provide leadership to the field.

A balance between leadership and support is possible only if the assistance agency recognizes its dependence on clients for success. While client satisfaction is receiving less emphasis as an indicator of effectiveness, dissatisfied clients -- both those who think the

assistance agency is too "pushy" and those who think it too passive -- can still cause problems because of the absence of adequate measures for evaluating technical assistance impact.

The assistance agency inevitably finds itself serving projects that, for a variety of reasons, fail to meet their goals, let alone realize their potential. In trying to help projects refine their programs and prepare for national dissemination, therefore, the assistance agency is faced with the inevitable conflict over what to do about the projects of poor quality that do not warrant national dissemination.

Overcoming the Conflicts

Often these problems have been resolved in one of three unsatisfactory ways: through the "tyranny of confidentiality," the "tyranny of expertise," or the "power hierarchy." The first two solutions are initiated most often by the technical assistance project, the third by the funding agency. A fourth, more positive approach to these conflicts is being used more and more often: "supportive collaboration."

The tyranny of confidentiality is an attempt by the technical assistance group to separate itself from the monitoring function. It withholds all significant information about client projects from others in the interest of maintaining the confidentiality of the relationship. If the assistance agency and the client projects assume an adversarial posture with the sponsor, the locus of control within the triangle (Figure 2) subtly shifts toward the assistance agency, and the sponsor loses access to some important information about its funded projects.

The tyranny of expertise occurs when assistance agency staff members perceive themselves as the ultimate experts in the field -- gurus whose authority is beyond question by the client projects or the sponsors. When

conflict arises, the locus of control is thus always in the technical assistance agency. The sponsor's power to control and influence is weakened by the purported incontrovertability of the technical assistants' expertise and leadership position in the field.

This shift in the locus of control is unacceptable and may lead to a power confrontation and the imposition of the power hierarchy. With its informal leadership position weakened and its power threatened, the sponsoring agency becomes frustrated and resolves the problem by asserting its power. The triangular relationship becomes a hierarchical one in which services to and contact with the client project are tightly controlled by the sponsoring agency.

A fourth approach to resolving problems is supportive collaboration. Characteristics of this type of relationship include:

- Frequent communication between the technical assistance project director and the program officer. This fosters a trusting relationship in which both become increasingly sensitized to each other's information: the project director to the demands and hopes of the funding agency, the program officer to the nature and needs of the client system.

- Frequent communication and collaboration to refine the technical assistance system continuously. Rarely is the range of technical assistance needed clear during initial needs assessment and planning. Needs change. Predictions of appropriate services and activities will need modification.

- A technical assistance staff which acts neither as an advocate for clients against the funding agency nor as an apologist for the funding

agency to the clients (e.g., when cumbersome federal reporting procedures must be followed by the clients).

- A technical assistance agency which considers itself a resource to clients and funding agency. For example, it identifies problems and concerns within the client system for the funding agency to address.

- A funding agency staff which identifies problems within the client system that the technical assistance staff can address, and which works with them in addressing the needs.

- A technical assistance agency which provides important information to the funding agency by identifying policy issues to be addressed. It can also identify resources within the client system that may be used in meeting the priorities of the funding agency.

- A relationship between sponsor and clients that is seen as an important means to information about the kind of technical assistance needed and the extent to which current services meet client needs. This information can be used to improve the program.

- The development of multiple opportunities for funding agency and technical assistance agency staffs to collaborate with clients: e.g., joint presentations at workshops, joint site visits, jointly authored publications, etc. In these activities, the separation of functions (i.e., clearly dissociating technical assistance from monitoring) should be addressed.

The Future

The fact that the material in this article is a consolidation of the

knowledge we now have about our field rather than a statement of theories is a testimony to recent work. But there is yet much to be done. Whatever advances are realized must become the knowledge of all of us -- funding agents, clients, and technical assistance personnel -- to use in improving education.

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